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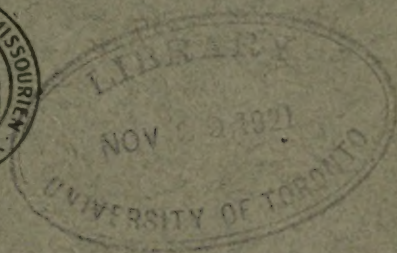
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AN ODISIOUS COMPARISON

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AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE

THE ALPHA CHAPTER OF MISSOURI

PHI BETA KAPPA

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It lies peculiarly within the province of teachers of the Classics to instil in us that poise so invaluable in the presence of contemporary upheavals. Professor Norlin's striking parallel between the German point of view of today and the Athenian point of view of the past cannot fail to impress those who read his instructive address.

AN ODISIOUS COMPARISON

Some time ago I found myself in a Los Angeles hotel without any money. I had, however, a small New York draft which I presented confidently at the desk. I say confidently, for I had been struck, as has every traveler in California, by the accommodating eagerness of the people of that State to honor drafts, checks, or any other such evidence of a disposition to part with one's possessions. Imagine, therefore, my chagrin when the clerk demanded, in that supercilious tone which I suppose the privileged have taken with suppliants since the beginning of time, whether I had any one who could identify me. I said, "No, I am an utter stranger here." Now ordinarily being a stranger in Los Angeles is a sufficient guarantee of respectability, but my identity as a tourist was, it seems, in question. The clerk retired and presently returned with the manager. Again I was chilled by a cold scrutiny; again I was hurt by searching questions. Had I no way of proving that I was sailing under my own colors—no letters, no credentials of any kind? I searched through the pockets of my coat, in vain; of my vest, in vain. I began to grow suspicious of myself when my fingers in their nervous excursions to and fro chanced upon my watch fob and my golden key. I seized upon it with joyous relief. "Here", I said, "is the token of my membership in Phi Beta Kappa. You see my name inscribed upon it and the place and time of my election." He looked at it gingerly, almost shrinking as from something weird and uncanny; and finally, as if eager to get back on mortal and familiar ground, he asked "You haven't got an Elk's card about your clothes, have you?"

Ladies and gentlemen, it was a trying situation on which I do not care to dwell. I will only say that I tried then as I have tried since to show myself worthy of our traditions. I summoned what I could of academic dignity; I tried hard to be "the captain of my soul." But it was difficult then and I confess I have often found it difficult since. Will you forgive me if I say that I find it difficult now? I think I know what a Phi Beta Kappa address ought to be; I think I know that it is expected to drop

gently upon the ears from the heights of an unruffled, Olympian calm. "It is sweet," said the placid philosopher, "to look upon the mighty contests of war arrayed along the plains without yourself sharing in the danger; it is sweet to hold the lofty and serene positions well fortified by the learning of the wise from which you may look down upon others and see them wandering all abroad and going astray in their search for the path of life, . . . their striving night and day with surpassing effort to struggle up to the summit of power and be masters of the world."

I, however, cannot rise to such philosophical aloofness. I am of the world in which men appear to have dethroned Zeus and set up the idol Whirligig, and I reel with the common vertigo. I am of the world in which men pluck the God of Nations by the ear and chat familiarly with "*unserem guten alten deutschen Gott dort oben*," and I find myself dazed and bewildered with the rest. I am of the world which has observed with admiration, not to say affection, the rise of a wonderful people to imperial greatness, to a first place in commerce, in beneficent social legislation, in effective political organization, in the councils of the nations, in science, in literature, in the arts—a people so rich in what we term the gifts of civilization that their wealth has overflowed their boundaries and penetrated all the world—a people who have given us many of our best Americans—a people who have taught many of us in their universities and impressed us by their kindness, their sentiment, even their softness of heart; and I am of the world which has seen that people turn to the worship of iron, "*Gott der Eisen wachsen liess*," preach the gospel of hate, exalt cruelty to a virtue, and justify itself as the cyclone or the flood might justify itself, by the necessity of its own existence.

It seems a contradiction in nature, a reversal of the inevitable order of things. It is as if a tree should grow downward, or the sun fall from the sky, or the stars crash about our heads. It is Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values" with a vengeance. I can think of nothing else; I can speak of nothing else. The most that I can do is to view it not as a thing altogether unique, not as some new diabolism hoarded up by malicious Fate against our time, but as an old tragedy on a new stage, and, seeing it in this

light, to derive for myself such mental comfort as comes from stripping away the vague terrors of the unknown.

Some twenty-four centuries ago the greatest of Greek historians told the grim story of the Peloponnesian War. He characterized that protracted struggle as the most terrible within the memory of man. It engaged practically the whole of what was then the significant world; all the Greek states were involved sooner or later, and barbarians as well. It was a world war and a world calamity. Famine and plague conspired with slaughter and exile to debase the spirit of man. Never had there been such a complete "transvaluation of all values." "Words," says Thucydides, "had no longer the same relation to things. Reckless aggression was loyal courage; prudential delay was the excuse of a coward; frantic energy was the true quality of a man; the lover of violence alone was free from the charge of hypocrisy; the seal of good faith was not divine law but fellowship in crime; the honest simplicity which is so large a part of a noble nature was laughed to scorn and disappeared. Striving in every way to overcome each other, men committed the most monstrous crimes, observing neither the bounds of justice nor of expediency, but making the caprice of the moment their law. Those who were of neither party fell a prey to both; either they were disliked because they held aloof or men were jealous of their surviving. Human nature, having trampled under foot all laws, delighted to show that her passions were ungovernable, that she was stronger than justice, and the enemy of everything above her. . . . But when men are retaliating upon others they are reckless of the future and do not hesitate to annul those common laws of humanity to which every individual trusts for his hope of deliverance should he ever be overtaken by calamity. They forget that in their own hour of need they will look for them in vain."*

Such are some of the dark colors in which the Athenian historian draws the picture of events which occurred in his own time "and of like events," he adds with gloomy clairvoyance, "which may be expected to happen hereafter in the order of human things."

*The renderings from Thucydides are, for the most part, those of Jowett.

I am aware that the distinguished President Emeritus of Harvard University has recently warned us against taking our instruction from ancient history. "The social and individual problems of life were," he objects, "simpler in the ancient world than in the modern, and they were often solved by giving play to the elemental passions of human nature; so that the study of them affords but imperfect guidance to wise action amid the wider and more complex conditions of the modern world." It would be silly presumption on my part not to respect the words of so wise a man and so ripe a scholar, and it is with hesitating diffidence that I venture the opinion that the distinction between ancient and modern times is not that human nature was more elemental then than now. It was undoubtedly more simple, more frank, more itself, more naked than now. Modern civilization is more millineristic, more artificially, more fantastically dressed. Our motives, our impulses, our aspirations even are more elaborately be-wigged, be-hobbled and be-high-heeled; and when we approach the ancients with our passion for disguises, we are apt to be shocked, as Dr. Eliot is shocked, to find them insufficiently clothed.

If this is a real difference, and I believe it is, it may be questioned whether it is the part of a sound education to shun altogether the ancient simplicities and directnesses for the more impenetrable proprieties and complexities of a later world. In any case we must take our parallels where we find them, and I can find no such illuminating parallel to the outstanding features of the present cataclysm as is found in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War and particularly of the tragic career of Athens in the course of that war. The parallel has been noted more than once. Gilbert Murray has touched upon it in the preface to his translation of the *Trojan Woman* of Euripides; Irving Babbitt has mentioned it in a clever article in *The Nation*; and all students of Greek history must in these last years have read into the empty saying that history repeats itself a fulness of ominous verity.

That ancient world war, like all wars that have ever happened, had its roots in the past. In order to appreciate anything of its significance we must go back fifty years to the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, which, I need not re-

mind you, was essentially a struggle between Eastern despotism and free institutions. Again and again the pages of Herodotus, the historian of this war, are lighted up by the Hellenic worship of liberty, of the right of each state to work out its own salvation in its own way, to be free to make and obey its own commands. Freedom was as yet a new and glorious birth in the world, and never before or since has it seemed so sweet as then when it confronted its first terrible danger. "Tyranny," Herodotus makes one of his characters say, "Tyranny disturbs ancient laws, violates women and kills men without trial; but a free people ruling themselves have in the first place the most beautiful name in the world, and in the next place, they do none of these things." I need not remind you either that in this fight of the Greeks for freedom Athens among the Greek states played the noblest part. Sinking her own ambitions in a common cause, yielding to others the precedence she herself deserved, thinking first of Hellas and second of herself, she proved herself, as Herodotus says in his matter of fact way, the "Savior of the Greeks."

And she had her reward. Many, a great many, of the Greek states forgot for the time being their local pride and jealousy and enrolled themselves right willingly under her leadership in a league to make the world safe against tyranny. The records of the years from the formation of this so-called Confederacy of Delos to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War are sadly incomplete, but even so they reveal a steady outflow of energy from Athens which is simply astounding. Consider her military exploits alone, and you would think that she had no time for anything but fighting. Consider how active she was in erecting fortifications and in beautifying the city, and the Acropolis, and you would think that she had no time for anything but building. Consider her political history, the rapid steps by which her government at home became a true partnership of all the citizens in the high business of the state, and you would think that she must have concentrated on political reform. Consider her achievements in letters, and you would think that her vitality must have been chiefly of the spirit. Consider that while she was doing all this and more, she was busy welding the restless, centrifugal units of the confederacy into an empire, and you throw up your hands and explain with Pindar: *δαιμόνιον πόλιεθρον* a city of more-than-men!

Is it any wonder, human nature being what it has been till now, that with this energy Athens grew ambitious to energize the world? Is it any wonder that she sought to extend the sphere of her beneficent influence? Is it any wonder that she said to the members of her empire when they grew weary of basking in her glory, "You are better off with us," and accompanied the words by an invincible gesture of power? Is it any wonder that, knowing by intuition and experience that her institutions were the best in the world, she should have sent them abroad with her armies and ships of war and forced them upon those who preferred their own? And is it any wonder, human nature being what it has been till now, that Athens, once best beloved of Greek states as champion of liberty, came to be execrated by most of the world as a tyrant?

When Herodotus called Athens the "Savior of Greece," the Peloponnesian War had already begun, and he felt it necessary to preface his eulogy with these words: "Here I am compelled by the facts to express an opinion which will be offensive to most of mankind." And Thucydides makes the hatred against Athens still clearer: "The feeling of mankind was strongly on the side of the Spartans, for they were now the avowed liberators of Hellas. Cities and individuals were eager to assist them to the utmost both by word and deed. In general the indignation against the Athenians was intense; some were trying to be delivered from them and others fearful of falling under their sway."

This, then, is the situation of Athens at the beginning of the War: the strongest military power in Greece at the head of an empire now held together by force; isolated by the fear and hostility of the rest of the world and on the whole proud of that isolation, for, in a sense, it is the isolation of greatness. "Consider," says one of the Corinthian envoys, speaking to the Spartans, "what manner of men are these Athenians with whom you will have to fight. They are bold beyond their strength; they run risks which prudence would condemn; but in the midst of misfortunes they are full of hope. When conquerors they pursue their victory to the utmost; when defeated they fall back the least. Their bodies they devote to their country as though they belonged to other men; their true self is their mind which is most truly their own when employed in her service. When they do not carry out an inten-

tion which they have formed they seem to themselves to have sustained a personal bereavement; when an enterprise succeeds, they have gained a mere instalment of what is to come, but if they fail they at once conceive new hopes and so fill up the void. With them alone, to hope is to have, for they lose not a moment in the execution of an idea. This is the lifelong task, full of danger and toil, which they are always imposing on themselves. To do their duty is their only holiday and they deem the quiet of inaction to be as disagreeable as the most tiresome business. If a man should say of them in a word that they were born neither to have peace themselves nor allow peace to other men, he would simply speak the truth."

These are words which Thucydides puts into the mouth of an enemy. What a great Athenian could say on the same subject he records in the splendid funeral oration spoken by Pericles in honor of his countrymen who fell in the first battles of the War:

"To sum up—I say that Athens is the school of Hellas and that the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace. This is no passing and idle word but truth and fact; and the assertion is verified by the position to which these qualities have raised the state. For in the hour of trial Athens alone among her contemporaries is superior to the report of her. No enemy who comes against her is indignant at the reverses which he sustains at the hands of such a city; no subject complains that his masters are unworthy of him. And we shall assuredly be not without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and succeeding ages; we shall not need the praises of Homer or of any other panegyrist whose poetry may please for the moment . . . For we have compelled every land and every sea to open a path to our valour and have everywhere planted memorials of our friendship and our enmity. Such is the city for whose sake these men nobly fought and died; they could not bear the thought that she might be taken from them; and everyone of us who survive should gladly toil in her behalf."

I have taken but a paragraph from a wonderful eulogy of a wonderful people. If there breathes through it a feeling that

this sacred city is so lifted above the levels of ordinary humanity as to be "beyond good and evil," that it is the sanctuary of civilization, the heaven which is to leaven the world; if, in a word, the speech of Pericles has a taint of *hubris* in it, this is at least as easy for us to excuse, as it is for Kuno Francke, in his apology for Germany, to justify "that spirit of superciliousness, which, as a very natural concomitant of a century of extraordinary achievement, has developed, especially during the last twenty-five years, in the ruling classes of Germany." There is such a thing as pardonable pride in accomplishments which promise well for humanity. Compare the words of a less restrained spokesman for German ideals: "The world dominion of which Germany dreams is not blind to the lessons of the Napoleonic tyranny. Force alone, violence or brute strength by its mere presence or by its loud manifestation in war, may be necessary to establish this dominion, but its ends are spiritual. The triumph of the empire will be the triumph of German *Kultur*, of the German world vision in all its phases and departments of human life and energy; in religion, in poetry, in science, arts, politics, and in social endeavor." The utterance of Pericles is infinitely higher in tone, but its essence is the same. Power is not an end in itself. *Faust-recht* rests upon *Kultur-recht*. The will to dominate is sublimated by the crusader's zeal.

But listen again to Pericles when the reverses and rancors of war have touched even that great soul with cynicism: "Do not imagine that you are fighting about a simple issue, freedom or slavery. You have an empire to lose and there is the danger to which your imperial rule has exposed you. Neither can you resign your power if at this crisis any timorous or inactive spirit is for playing the honest man. For by this time your empire has become a tyranny which in the opinion of mankind may have been unjustly gained but cannot be safely surrendered. These men (i. e., men whom scruples of justice rob of power of aggression) would soon ruin a city, and if they were to go and found a state of their own they would equally ruin that."

When Pericles said this he was a sick and discouraged man, and had not long to live. Even so, the brutal implication of his statement is redeemed by the dignity of a nature which could never be ignoble. It remained for a blatant successor to his lead-

ership of the war party in Athens to speak more frankly. Pleading before the Athenian Assembly for a policy of frightfulness Cleon shouted: "Do not be misled by the most deadly enemies of empire, pity and fine words and equity"—a sentiment upon which the mad philosopher of modern Germany has set the seal of his high approval. "In vigorous eras," says Nietzsche, "noble civilizations see something contemptible in sympathy, in brotherly love, in lack of self assertion and self reliance."

Long before this time, the poet Hesiod had laid down the principle which was good enough for old fashioned Greece: "For the birds of the air and the beasts of the field hath Zeus ordained one law: that they prey upon one another; but for man hath he ordained justice which is by far the best." But a new philosophy was now changing all that. There is but one law: The big eat the little, the mighty inherit the earth. Moral commands and prohibitions—pity, mercy, brotherly love, good faith, just dealing—are mere conventions, mere conspiracies entered into by the weak against the strong, and have no justification whatever in the nature of things. Might is the only right. "Nature herself," says a speaker in Plato's *Gorgias*, "proves that it is right for the better man to exploit the worse, for the stronger to exploit the weaker. Again and again she reveals this truth both in the case of the animals and in the case of men in states and nations. By what right did Xerxes lead his army against Greece, or Darius march against the Scythians? One could give countless instances in which people act according to the law of nature, and not according to that artificial law which we set up when we attempt to mould the best and strongest among us, taking them in hand when they are young, taming, as it were, our lion-cubs with magic formulas and spells, and try to make slaves out of them by preaching that we should enjoy equality and that this is beautiful and right: But in spite of us, when a man is born with a nature strong enough, he shakes himself free of all these shackles, smashes through our hedges, tramples under foot our scraps of paper, our hypocritical tricks and charms and laws which are against nature; and lo our slave stands over us revealed as our master, and the justice of nature dawns in splendor."

Such doctrines were in the air, and lent no little aid and comfort to the rampant chauvinism of the period. They stand out

naked and unashamed in the plea by which the Athenians justified the atrocity of Melos. The little Island of Melos had steadily refused to take sides in the war and for a season was left in peace. Her neutrality was, however, a moral challenge to the Athenian Empire, and at the opportune time the Athenians landed a force upon Melos and demanded the submission of her people. Thucydides devotes page after page to the negotiations which were carried on, and the speeches which he records on both sides present very vividly a dramatic conflict of national aspirations moving grimly to its tragic climax. The Athenian actors drop all disguise of fine words. The Melians, they admit, had never harmed them; their only offense was their defenselessness, and they must yield to the empire of the strong. No Treitschke had as yet uttered the famous dictum that "Among all political sins, the sin of feebleness is the most contemptible; it is the political sin against the Holy Ghost." But such was substantially the Athenian argument. The Melians, in their turn, urge that it is their right to be free, that justice is on their side, and that therefore they are confident of the favor of Heaven, to which the Athenians reply:

"As for the gods, we expect to have quite as much of their favor as you, for we are not doing or claiming anything which goes beyond common opinion concerning divine or men's desires about human things. For of the gods we believe and of men we know that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule they will. This law was not made by us and we are not the first to have acted upon it and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you and all mankind, if you were as strong as we, would do as we do. . . . Surely you cannot dream of flying to that false sense of honor which has been the ruin of so many when danger stared them in the face. Many men with their eyes still open to the consequences have found the word "honor" too much for them and have suffered a mere name to lure them on until it has drawn down upon them real and irretrievable calamities; through their own folly they have incurred a worse dishonor than fortune would have inflicted upon them. If you are wise, you will not run this risk. You ought to see that there can be no disgrace in yielding to a great city which invites you to become her ally on reasonable terms, keeping your own land and merely

paying tribute, and you will certainly gain no honor, if, having to choose between two alternatives, safety and war, you obstinately prefer the worse."

Incredibly and nobly the Melians preferred "honor" and "the worse." "Men of Athens," they said, "our resolution is unchanged and we will not in a moment surrender the liberty which our city, founded seven hundred years ago, still enjoys. We will trust to the good fortune which by the favor of the gods has hitherto preserved us . . . and endeavor to save ourselves." Vain hope and trust! God was on the side of the strongest battalions; and "the Athenians," says Thucydides, speaking with restrained and unnatural calm, "put to death all the Melians who were of military age and made slaves of the women and children."

It may be that in some unearthly Island of the Blest the Melian dead are justified of their faith, but not in the world we know.

"O thou Pomegranate of the Sea
Sweet Melian Isle across the years
Thy Belgian sister calls to thee
In anguished sweat of blood and tears.

"Her fate like thine—a ruthless band
Hath ravaged all her loveliness.
How Athens spoiled thy prosperous land
Athenian lips with shame confess.

"Thou too a land of lovely arts
Of potter's and of sculptor's skill.
Thy folk of high undaunted hearts
As those that throb in Belgium still.

"Within thy harbor's circling rim
The warships long with banners bright
Sailed bearing Athens' message grim
'God hates the weak, Respect our Might.'

"The flames within thy fanes grew cold
Stilled by the foeman's swarming hords,
Thy sons were slain, thy daughters sold
To serve the lusts of stranger lords.

"For Attic might thou didst defy,
 Thy folk the foeman slew as sheep,
 Across the years hear Belgium's cry,
 'O sister of the wine-dark deep,

'Whose cliffs gleam seaward roseate,
 Not one of all thy martyr roll
 But keeps his faith inviolate;
 Man kills our body, not our soul.' "*

Thucydides has given us something more than an accurate chronicle of events. He has given us a great picture of the soul of Athens, of the breaking down of moral standards, of time-honored ideals, by lust for power reinforced by rancor and hate. He has given us a drama of the fall of man. Evidently he regards the Melian episode as the tragic climax. The real catastrophe is not Athens, once an imperial city, later moaning amid the ruins of her glory, but Athens once the savior of Greece for freedom now saying to Melos "It is a crime not to be a slave."

"Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad." After Melos, Thucydides represents the Athenians as seized by an infatuate recklessness. Throwing aside henceforth all pretense of military necessity, they embarked on that disastrous robber expedition to Sicily whose frank purpose was the conquest and plunder of the rich settlements of what was then the Western World.

Absit omen. I do not desire to press the parallel in all its details. I do not desire to overemphasize the itch for world-dominion in Germany which may include designs upon our own resources. "Comparisons are odious." Lovers of Athens will think that I have strained the parallel; admirers of Germany will not concede its significance. There are of course as many points of contrast as of resemblance. But on this ancient stage the Treitschkes, the Bernhardis, the Nietzsches, the Bethmann-Hollwegs, the scraps of paper—all the nightmare shapes of military necessity—play their sinister parts. The form changes, the spirit remains.

*The lines are by Grace Harriet MacCurdy.

I do not mean to say that Athens alone in her time and that Germany alone in her time have run amuck in this way. Megalomania is not a rare disease. To the Greek mind it is a sort of original sin. It battens on prosperity; it is held in check only by the buffets of adversity. Unusual achievement, extraordinary power, breed that full-blown domineering pride which they called *hubris*; *hubris* breeds the tyrant; and history in its largest aspects is a process of knocking bullies in the head. Perhaps this is too simple, and will not do for our modern complexities. But surely it has its measure of truth. That golden balance of modesty and self respect, which the Greeks named *sophrosuné* is still the supremely important virtue for men and nations, and there will be no living together in peace until we have it in a greater degree.

The war has already chastened us all. I hardly recognize my fellow-countrymen; the spirit of brag is so strangely absent. Let us hope, let us pray, that it is the modesty of a giant gathering all his mighty strength against a powerful enemy. Even Germany has come to see that there are laws beyond her fancied necessities; perhaps Maximilian Harden is right; perhaps she has even now "learned the mysterious ways of Providence." To bring that lesson home is the object of this war. Whatever dark currents may once have coursed beneath this mad upheaval, the issue is now splendidly clear. We now know what we are fighting for; we are fighting and must fight to a finish for *sophrosuné*; we are fighting for the spirit of *live and let live*. And to that spirit there must be no exception; no *vae victis* has ever saved the world, nor ever will. The dying words of Edith Cavell have pronounced the sweet evangel which should melt even the rigor of the system which destroyed her: "Standing as I do in view of God and Eternity, I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness toward anyone."

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LITERATURE SERIES

1. *The Congress of Letters*, by FRED NEWTON SCOTT, Professor of Rhetoric in the University of Michigan.

